

Hammams and the contemporary city: the case of Isfahan, Iran

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Hammams, or public baths, are an essential part of the social life in urban Islam. Often, they have a rich and inspiring architecture. In Iran and, in particular, in Isfahan – a large and historic city in central of Iran – numerous hammams were built since the *Safavid* dynasty (1501–1722). Social and urban changes have resulted in a significant decline in the number of hammams over the years. This paper starts by describing the multiple dimensions of hammams, such as their main architecture features, their role in health, society and culture. This is followed by an analysis of hammams in Isfahan, using a modified version of Büyükdigan categories for Ottoman baths: (i) ‘baths in ruins’; (ii) ‘baths continuing their original functions’; and (iii) ‘baths readjusted for new uses’. Anecdotal evidence from a survey conducted in 15 hammams is used throughout this paper. The main conclusions relate to the rapid deterioration of hammams in daily life, coupled with the lack of detailed documentation, which would allow proper planning and development, and the deficient use of some of these magnificent buildings and places for tourism development.

Keywords: hammams; ruins; new functions; Isfahan; Iran

Introduction

Hammam, ‘spreader of warmth’ in Arabic, also named ‘*Garmabeh*’ in Persian which literally means ‘hot water’, became synonymous with steam baths and bathing. Hammam is not only a specific type of building with distinctive architectural features, relying on the use of abundant amounts of water, but also a critical site for hygiene and health care, and an important place for social and cultural relationships and performances (Kilito 1992). Due to the quick changing patterns of urban life in Iran, hammams have been going through rapid transformations and many struggle to continue functioning (Bakhtiar 1974). Numerous hammams have closed down and are mere ruins, while others have been transformed, having various new public or private functions. This paper aims at contributing to the discussion of the contemporary role of hammams, and at stimulating the debate of the possibilities of uses of hammams in Isfahan, Iran. Firstly, it provides a brief account of the various dimensions of hammams and attempts to introduce public baths and the development of hammams in the Islamic world. Secondly, it builds on Büyükdigan’s (2003) work on the new functions of Ottoman baths, and uses three different

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categories to discuss hammams' present uses and possibilities of change in the contemporary city of Isfahan, Iran. While this is done based on a survey of 15 hammams in Isfahan, the paper does not intend to describe them in detail. Visits to all hammams described here were made between February 2010 and 2012. These visits included observation of the spaces, transect walks and regular visits, photographic registration, and whenever possible, informal conversations with hammam owners, managers, workers and users. In brief, the paper argues that hammams are a key part of contemporary Islamic cities and may have an important social, cultural and touristic role to play, if properly planned and developed.

Hammams

Hammams have existed since the Hellenistic period and flourished with the Romans and Byzantines (Sibley 2006). Whereas the bathing tradition died out in the west, it continued in the Levant after the arrival of Muslim Arabs, and the period following the rise of Islam witnessed a rapid development in public baths and some modifications from Roman to Islamic bathing. Hammams were mostly established within the framework of a charitable endowment – *Waqf* – with personal property to serve the needs of Muslims. Established during Safavid times and cloaked as a religious/charitable act, this is a system that supports perpetual charitable activities through the periodical revenues generated from fixed assets such as buildings (Habashi 2008), and used primarily as an economic development stimulus. The spatially gendered nature of hammams acquired a great significance during the Islamic period. Yet, while structurally the majority of them have two baths with 'gendered quarters or men's and women's hours' (Aksit 2011, p. 1), and are often symmetrically built and organised, the complexity of the gender dimension in hammams goes well beyond this materiality. Cichocki (2005), for example, argues that hammams have historically been thought of as a public masculine space where revolts and other subversive actions were planned. Aksit (2011) explains how women's quarters of the historical hammams run contrary to the definition of public spheres that are associated with men and rational dialogue, and are characterised by being spaces where women formulate discussions on urban contexts and history. Water is the crucial element in hammams in countless ways. It is central in hygiene, in health, in the sacred and the sublime (Anderson and Tabb 2002), at times in the propagation of diseases (Afkhani 1998) and has an important social role. Ancient medicine was strongly connected to ideas about water and to the equilibrium it provided to any system, religious or physical (Kosso and Scott 2009); religion not only shapes the ways in which people transform space and construct meaningful places (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004), but also embeds them with specific practices. Major and minor ablutions bring Muslims to hammams at certain moments.

Generally, Iranian hammams have a threefold structure, spatially and functionally sequential: the *Sarbineh* (the dressing room), the *Miyandar* (a connecting corridor) and the *Garmkhaneh* (the hot bathing room). *Sarbineh* has a polyhedral base (octagon, hexagonal, rectangular or quadrilateral), which includes a duplicate base inside it. Normally, the platforms around *Sarbineh* are the places to change clothes and relax. Spaces under these platforms serve to deposit shoes. In some cases, there are several fountains around the *Sarbineh*, which people use to wash their feet before moving to the next compartment. In addition, several stone pillars are located under the *Sarbineh*'s central dome and some lower ceilings also cover the side

platforms. The *Miyandar* exists to reduce the heat waste and to avoid direct views into the bath. Finally, the *Garmkhaneh* is the hot washing room with a polyhedral base, which is generally divided into different parts by stone pillars. In fact, on the centre of the *Garmkhaneh*, there is usually a dome with stone pillars. In larger hammams, the *Garmkhaneh* can be divided in various bathing rooms, like *Khazineh*, *Khalvat* and *Chal Howz*. *Khazineh*, a small pool used for ablution, is usually located in front of the entrance to the *Garmkhaneh*. Also in some cases, adjacent to the *Garmkhaneh*, there is a *Khalvat* room, or solitude room, which is used by the owner or special guests. *Chal Howz* refers to a swimming pool inside the big *Garmkhaneh* (Rohol Amini 2007, Neyestani and Amirhajloo 2010). In some hammams, there are two large and two small baths connected to each other, which aim at reducing heat waste. All different parts of the bathhouse have geometrical bases. Often, the entrance to the small bath is located on the opposite side of the hammam. In addition, next to many hammams, there is a long corridor – *Gavro* – leading to a well, from which an ox pulls water buckets. Foot-operated wells were also found in smaller buildings. Apart from these common structural features, variations in design and decoration are immense, and hammams constitute a rich heritage.

Dumreicher (2008) has illustrated how hammams are a vital part of the Islamic city and are normally well embedded in the historic urban fabric. Their position is never prominent, with blind facades, and with discreet entrances often in a back lane (Sibley 2006). Usually, the women's entrance, often a much smaller door than the men's entrance, is even more unnoticeable (Aksit 2011). Hammams are conspicuous when viewed from the air, since their vaulted domes are impossible to overlook. Due to their central location, hammams can be desirable development sites, and newly designed hammam facilities may develop from traditional ones. These developments may find expression in the architectural solutions chosen to accommodate the additional activities to the core function of the hammam. Hence, many newly developed bathhouse complexes are designed using local materials (such as bricks and stones) for the structure and incorporate the distinctive domes and vaults, as seen in traditional historical practice. Sibley (2006) conducted a survey within historical hammams in Damascus and Fez. First, she established a guide for designing hammams based mainly on the dynamics of transformation within Islamic society. Secondly, she highlighted the characteristics of this building type not only as a sustainable urban facility which promotes social interaction, but also as a support for a rich intangible heritage. In fact, hammams' intangible heritage relates to urban narratives and experiences. It is lodged in conversations, in social life, in the gendered nature of the space it produces and reproduces, in the secrets and intrigues it conceals and in the compliance with beauty norms. As Destino and Sibley (2012, p. 55) argue, 'The living heritages of the hammam are echoes of earlier voices, songs, and images, not only of voices heard in the childhood but also of the reverberations of ideas through cultural history'. Thus, transformations in hammams – their demolition, their closure, the changing of function, etc. – not only alter cities structurally, but also socially and culturally.

Sibley's study suggested that the few surviving hammams in Damascus are located near the touristic historic areas. These have been physically restored and new functions such as massage rooms, showers and pools were introduced. Other hammams have changed function and are used for storage or as workshops. Most of those still operating have ceased to receive women, closing their doors to the

few remaining female users and contributing to the disappearance of a rich intangible heritage associated with their usage. How the changing function of hammams is impacting women's lives (in Isfahan, for instance) is an important subject that social scientists still have to address. Thus, hammams' functions may change as they are bound to the social setting in which they are placed. In Fez, Morocco, as in many other cities in the Maghreb, the existence of a densely populated medina – where traditional modes of life are still taking place – is tightly connected to the maintenance and functioning of most historical hammams (Sibley 2006). Nevertheless, they mostly cater for the poor, since poverty rates in the medina (just like in other Moroccan medinas) are significantly higher than the urban average (Tagemouati 2012).

Hammams can also be understood as key sites through which culture travels. Historically, as Gandy (2004, p. 180) argues:

the rediscovery of the pleasures of bathing in the eighteenth century carried with it an erotic charge and often drew on Orientalist conceptions of sensuality derived from European travelers' encounters with the hammams of North Africa and the Middle East.

Baths were central to western displays of Oriental ways of life in World Fairs (Çelik 1992), together with the mosque, the fountain and a residence (pavilion). Hammams remain a utopian space in the European imagination (Sibley 2008), sustained in a complex and multilayered dialectic by references that rely heavily on nineteenth-century legacies which include paintings, quietness, sensuality and pleasure (Çelik 1992).

Currently, many hammams in the western world are a central social and cultural piece within dislocated communities, such as Turkish emigrants in Germany. Here, hammams serve as a meeting place for immigrants, and where certain cultural practices and traditions of their home countries are occasionally re-enacted. By contrast, other hammams also in the west have been appropriated by western behaviour and by the tourism industry. Two examples are the Iranian Yasmin hammam in Paris, open since 1975, and the Turkish private Sultan hammam in Berlin, open since 1999, which cater for Turkish and Iranian communities in these countries, but also for a western population that is attracted by the exotic and sensual idea of the east. Finally, it is also important to mention hammams that have been developed to cater solely for international tourists. Çağaloğlu and Çemberlitas, both in Istanbul, are good examples of what have become extremely commodified places.

Hammams in Isfahan

In Iran, some of the most important material heritage dates back to the *Safavid* dynasty (1501–1722), the longest lasting Persian dynasty in the past 1000 years. The dynasty is considered by many scholars to have created some of the most important architecture in Iran, the city of Isfahan being a particular example of the architectural achievements of this period. It united the successor states of the Arab empire into a Persian state and introduced *Shia* as the state religion, either because of the preponderance of *Shia* Islam in Persian's territory or to counter the *Sunni* Islam of their rivals, the Ottoman empire (Foran 1992, Lewis 1997). Few hammams dated before the *Safavid* dynasty remain, since Mongol and Timurid empires

destroyed most heritage buildings (Tabasi *et al.* 2007). With the *Safavid* dynasty, Mongol superstitions related to washing the head and body were replaced by a conduct of cleanliness, and hammams acquired a new importance for the Shia Muslims (Tabasi *et al.* 2007, p. 52).

After losing Baghdad to the Turks, and fearing for the safety of the old capitals, Tabriz and Qazvin, which were considered too close to the Ottoman Empire, Shah Abbas (1587–1629), one of the most renowned *Safavid* monarchs, chose Isfahan as his capital. Dating from Sasanid times, the city on the banks of River Zayandeh was the capital of the Seljuk dynasty from 1051, but was laid waste by Tamerlane in 1388. Shah Abbas' outward looking agenda, epitomised by an energetic foreign policy, created a freshly inviting political and economic environment centred on a new, resplendent capital Isfahan (Matthee 2009). This situation coincided with, and was partly responsible for, an active European interest in Iran as a land of religious, commercial and strategic opportunity. Chardin, a French traveller in the *Safavid* period in Iran, counted 273 hammams in Isfahan in his travelogue (in Smolijaninovaite 2007, see also Lambton and Sourdel-Thomine 2007).

Once, being one of the most important cities in the world (Lambton and Sourdel-Thomine 2007), Isfahan is located on the main north-south and east-west routes crossing Iran, it is the capital of Isfahan province and has a population of over 1, 6 million people (Statistical Centre of Iran 2012). It is Iran's third largest populated city after Tehran and Mashhad, and it is also one of the main tourist centres, if not the most important, of the country (Assari and Mahesh 2011). Presently, 16 buildings are registered in Isfahan as traditional hammams: Ali Gholi Agha, Darb Emam, Dardasht, Ghazi, Haj Banan, Haj Kazem, Janat, Jarchy, Khosro Agha, Roghani, Shah Ali, Shah, Shahzadeha, Sheikh Alsalam, Sheikh Bahaei and Vazir (list provided by the Isfahan office of the Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICHHTO)¹). This is not a comprehensive list, and some traditional hammams, such as Rehnai or Jolfa, are not included. Presently, many of the functioning hammams in Isfahan are also endowed, and their ownership remains with the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

Büyükdigan (2003) has provided a critical analysis of the new functions of Ottoman baths. For the purpose of this paper – the analysis of the situation of hammams in Isfahan – we have used two of the four categories established by Büyükdigan (2003): (i) 'baths in ruins' and (ii) 'baths continuing their original functions'; and combined two of his categories – 'baths misused as shops, depots (warehouses), small factories, etc.' and 'baths re-arranged for a new use' (2003, p. 620) – into (iii) 'baths readjusted for new uses'. The justification for the combination of Büyükdigan's categories lies in the difficult practical distinction between the concepts of misuse and rearranged, the former seen as carrying negative impacts to the baths present use and the latter as having positive gains. We have also encountered several examples of baths being under renovation. Therefore, in this paper, our analysis is constructed upon the condition of 15 hammams: one presently in ruins (Khosro); four continuing their original function (Gharchaghe, Haj Banan, Zafarani and Kohanestan); six transformed for new uses (Sattari, Afyat, Ali Gholi Agha, Vazir, Dardasht and Jolfa); and four being repaired at the moment (Shah, Shahzadeha, Ghazi and Jarchy). Some hammams may fall into more than one category.

Disused baths in ruined conditions

Similar to many other cities in the Levant – see Fadli and Sibley (2008) and El Kerdani (2008) on Cairo and Sibley (2006) on Damascus – many hammams in Isfahan have been bulldozed into oblivion, victims of urban dynamics or urban neglect (very little has been published or can be found regarding this obliteration process). Countless others are in ruins. We may attempt to sketch the causes for the decline of hammams in Isfahan in three main points. Firstly, Islamic cities – just as Islamic societies – must be understood as changing spaces that in this sense do not differ much from European examples. In Iran, in particular, the historic centres of the larger cities went through significant transformations under Reza Shah (1925–1941). Unlike the urban principles of colonial rule in British India or in French Morocco, his urban reforms, inspired by a combination of Haussmann and Atatürk (Mazumdar 2000), followed the path of a close and intimate amalgamation of traditional and modern urban forms (Ehlers and Floor 1993). New streets and avenues dissecting the historic core led to numerous demolitions in the urban fabric, including hammams, and a sharp urban growth took place. Between 1930 and 1941, the total population in Isfahan increased from 80,000 to more than 200,000 (Ehlers and Floor 1993, p. 262), and this trend continued in the following decades, with population increasing six-fold between 1956 and 2006 (Assari and Mahesh 2011, p. 465). Thus, in Iran, and in the Middle East, urban renewal of the old city centres led to a juxtaposition of the old and the modern fabric (Ehlers and Floor 1993, Sibley 2008), which was not the case in many of the Maghreb cities. More recently, the accelerated urban growth, and semi-processes of gentrification in some areas of the city, notably along the riverfront, has been responsible for numerous urban morphology changes. These recent urban changes accentuated the situations, where several hammams – that were once surrounded by traditional old quarters and by inhabitants who have been using hammams for generations – are now encircled by newer urban blocks, inhabited by people who do not use or need to use hammams. These transformation processes are in tune with what is happening in other Islamic cities, such as Cairo (El Kerdani 2008, Fadli and Sibley, 2008), Damascus (Sibley 2006) and Istanbul (Cichocki 2005; Smolijaninovaitė 2007). Secondly, in the early twentieth century, in Isfahan, as in many other large Iranian cities, water was supplied by shallow wells distributed by open air canals (Ehlers and Floor 1993), which together with poor housing in the historic centre meant that the hammam was a key urban site, with plenty of clientele. With the improvement of housing and sanitary conditions within the context of Reza's urban reforms, the hammam became less prominent. At the same time, Reza Shah, who did not rely on the traditional sources of political legitimacy – religion and tribe – promoted secular ideas, reviving and generating a pre-Islamic collective memory (Grigor 2004) and stressing anti-clericalism. His son, Mohammad Reza, who ruled from 1941 to the Islamic revolution in 1979, continued to focus on the modernisation and westernisation of the country.² Based upon the widespread of diseases in Iran – nineteenth century Iran was a fertile ground for the fatal spread of cholera (Afkhani 1998) – a strong discussion regarding unhealthy conditions in hammams was gradually spread. Under severe complaints by Islamic clergy, some hammams were ordered to close down, while others were forced to renovations, introducing showers and other modern infrastructure.

Thirdly, despite the religious nature of the city, nowadays going to the hammam is seen as a backward social practice, and reveals traditional ways of life that are,

according to a younger generation, incompatible with modern, international and cosmopolitan behaviours. Younger generations have new understandings of cleanliness and dirt, having established discourses that declared hammams as unhygienic. It is perhaps important to mention that although the central districts of the city have a higher age average than the total city, over 20% are less than 15 years old and only about 5% are over 65 years of age (Assari and Mahesh 2011). Younger and middle-class generations are more enthusiastic about the growth of spas in many hotels and the development of health and medical tourism throughout the country and abroad. Thus, the hammam as an intergenerational social space tends to disappear.



Figure 1. Khosro Agha *hammam*. Source: Authors, January 2012.

While it is not possible to use a ruined hammam for its original purpose, the site should not be regarded as an unusable place. Khosro Agha hammam, presently no more than a *Safavid* ruin (Figure 1), was demolished in the mid-1990s. At the time (1995), local people protested and discontentment was evident in several newspapers, but the urban forces to build a new car parking were stronger than conservation issues. Nowadays, the site is obviously an embodiment of a past and a physical reminder of what has vanished, a sign of cultural and religious beliefs, of past sanitation realities. However, Khosro Agha, as well as other ruined hammams, does not need to be a site of disregard, abandonment or a document to damage. Following Edensor's (2005) ideas, ruins can be spaces in which involuntary memories may be stimulated. The focus should not be on the inert remains but on their reconfiguration (see, e.g. Stoler 2008). In contrast to the conscious use, transmission and representation of the past – such as in a museum – ruins can be ambivalent in their meaning and can invoke memories. They are emblematic sites of the inevitability of life passing, and can tell us a lot about wider social and cultural processes across urban space. Therefore, Khosro Agha allows us to think of how a spatialisation of memory and heritage could be developed in Isfahan. On-site explanations, the assemblage and display of iconographic material in various dynamic and interactive forms, the establishing of perceptible connections to other parts of the city, and physically constructing memoryscapes is a possibility that can be part of a larger strategy for reconsolidating hammams in the city. A ruin may not be much on itself, but if part of a network of sites of memory may acquire a meaning beyond its physical entity. At various places, the traditional imprinting of memory in the city, which is often done through conservation policies that privilege reconstruction of sites and which imply significant costs, can be achieved through creative interventions in ruins, highlighting as well the intangible nature of hammams heritage.

Baths continuing their original functions

Despite a clear decline, hammams in Isfahan are still important, both from a social as well as from a religious perspective, especially in the more traditional areas of Isfahan (see, e.g. Gharchaghe, Haj Banan, Zafarani and Kohanestan hammams). They are centrally associated with the celebration of important life events such as births, circumcisions and weddings, and numerous traditions and rituals, which are transmitted from one generation to another and still alive today, and, therefore, they represent rich intangible elements of urban heritage. Clearly, they are more present in the lives of older and traditional people who have been using these sites since childhood. However, they are also associated with the daily life of many people of lower income. Foreign workers (notably Afghan), low budget tourists and people who have no bathroom at home use them. Others use it since water and gas prices have increased sharply in the last years. From our survey, it was possible to register that no more than 15 or 20 people daily use most hammams. While this is a vital public service available to them, it means fragile economic viability.

Two distinct situations arise when assessing functioning hammams. One concerns buildings of historical value. While in Isfahan, there are some hammams classified by the ICHTO, the vast majority of functioning hammams in the city is not from the *Safavid* dynasty, and is much more recent. A complete documentation of urban heritage and of these buildings – in particular – is still to be conducted, and there is no clear strategy of planning and administration or integrated plans for

restoration. This is, in part, the consequence of the existence of various entities responsible for this heritage (e.g. private owners, local authorities, endowment authorities, etc.). Without a doubt, historical hammams need to be preserved from demolition and decay, either continuing their original function or changing into new uses.

The other issue relates to hammams which are key sites of traditional practices in a public place, ‘sweeting, scrubbing, and socialising’, as in the title of a CNN article (Sterns 2009), despite not having an intrinsic historical value. These practices are both fragile and resilient (Skounti 2009), and their malfunctioning and decline pose a threat for people of lower income, and for women in particular. As Aksit (2011, p. 279) argues ‘historically the hammam has served to vindicate women’s right to walk around the city and, to the same extent, today it serves to connect them with their historically-legitimated public existence’. Hammams have been for a long time counter spaces that allow women to escape the dominant masculine sphere and to reconfigure the relationships between women and their bodies (Simon 2007). These two worlds of material and intangible heritage, a sociocultural heritage in the words of Kolb and Dumreicher (2008), should meet and be protected (see, for instance, Sibley 2006 and the case of Damascus). Maintaining adequate levels of cleanliness and contemporary standards of health and safety, which Kolb and Dumreicher (2008) mention to be hard to find on their case studies, is vital to preserve these sites functioning. But ultimately, the hammam can only be successful if a more encompassing rehabilitation takes place, at least at the residential quarter scale (Figures 2 and 3).

Baths readjusted for other uses

Büyükdigan (2003) argues that new functions of old baths can be passive or active. The former refers to baths used as museums or art galleries. In this case, not only the institutional use attracts people, but also the activity is an important product of this type of conversion. In his view, these are the most suitable functions for reusing old baths, assuring a good degree of proper restoration. They are often in public hands. The latter refers to baths used as shopping centres, department stores, night



Figure 2. Gharchaghe *hammam* Big Sarbineh and Big Garmkhaneh. Source: Authors, September 2011.



Figure 3. Gharchaghe *hammam* Big Sarbineh and Big Garmkhaneh. Source: Authors, September 2011.

clubs, art galleries,³ offices,⁴ (Figures 4 and 5) restaurants and teahouses, and despite being a better solution than leaving buildings to decay, it entails a certain danger of ill-informed renewal or functioning.⁵ In the case of Iran, restaurants and teahouses are some of the most common uses of old hammams. According to Majd-edin Rahimi, an archaeologist concerned with the rehabilitation of Iranian historic cities, more than 95% of traditional hammams in Iran were either completely destroyed or are used as traditional coffee shops (Entekhab 2011). At times, they have a remarkable tourism role. The Lonely Planet guide to Iran (2008, p. 80) notes that the restaurant Sofrehkane ye Sonnat Ebrahimabad, a former hammam, is 'reason enough to visit Ardabil'. Jolfa and Jarchy are two good examples of Isfahan hammams converted into restaurants. While the former is located near the Big Bazaar and will be a traditional restaurant, significantly, the latter is located in the

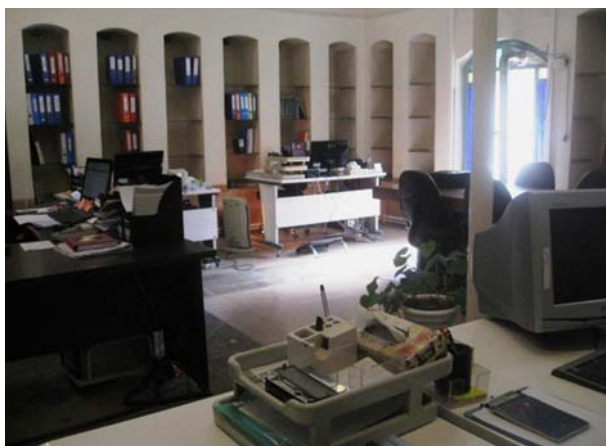


Figure 4. Sattari hammam Office in Sarbineh. Source: Authors, January 2012.



Figure 5. Afiyat hammam Sarbineh. Source: Authors, November 2011.

Armenian quarter, popularly known as ‘little Paris’, a neighbourhood distant from the old city centre and the bazaar, and one of the most modern and lively parts of the city (see Vivier-Muresan 2007). Here, we find one of the most vibrant parts of the city, which is characterised by high property prices and a dynamic economy that translates into various cafés and restaurants, a predominantly Christian population, and a proximity to some of the most gentrified quarters of the city (on the south riverside).

Taking advantage of the tourism potential of Isfahan, Ali Gholi Agha hammam is a good example of a careful restoration, undertaken in 2002, and which transformed a ruined hammam into a museum of bathhouses (Figures 7 and 8). Here, tourism and heritage merge. In the *Garmkhaneh*, visitors can read information in Farsi and English from a large panel and can roam freely or be guided by English-speaking interpreters. A CD with a detailed account of the hammam and a virtual 3D visit is also available. This is one of the key sites that make up the tourist circuit in Isfahan, and is mentioned in most guide books. Trip Advisor, for example, classifies this hammam as one of the top 20 attractions of the city, and, excluding the first month of Spring⁶ when over 11,000 people visited Ali Gholi Agha, available statistics tell us that the hammam received 4000 visitors per month on average in 2011 (Figure 6). Over 95% of these visitors are residents in Iran, which is in line with the overall dominance of domestic tourism in the country and with the relatively low number of international tourists. While tourism is likely to remain a minor industry in relation to oil and gas, it has an important contribution to make with respect to job creation. Perhaps, here lies one of the possibilities for hammam transformation into tourism sites. Yet, not all hammams can or should be transformed into museums.

Looking into more detail to the museum, we see a static representation of traditional scenes of the public bath in *Safavid* times, displaying men in massage, smoking nargilah or just relaxing and waiting, while also displaying many artefacts. The architecture, painted tiles, carved stucco domes and wonderfully decorated domes representing the sky and heaven, illustrate well the richness of past times and a hammam for the wealthy and powerful. Ali Gholi Agha is a social representation of

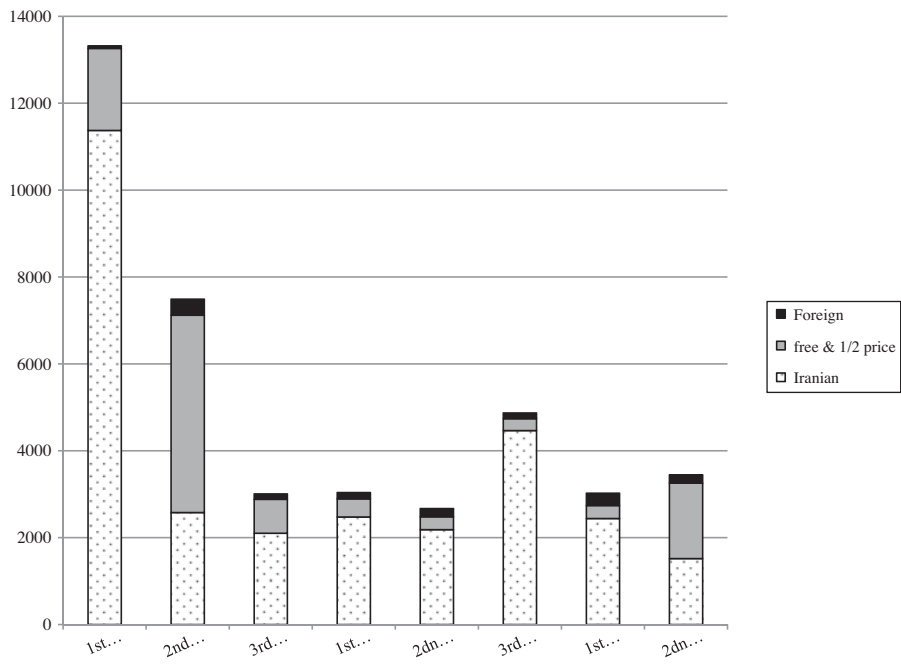


Figure 6. Visitor numbers in Ali Gholi Agha, 2011.



Figure 7. Ali Gholi Agha hammam (scene from the museum). Source: Authors, January 2011.



Figure 8. Ali Gholi Agha hammam (repairing tiles). Source: Authors, January 2011.

a hammam that highlights the ways in which powerful men used the building, and it neglects other spaces of the hammam, for instance, where women moved and where workers traced their paths to serve the powerful. As Smith (2008) argues, heritage is gendered, and, here, we clearly see a male-centred story. The ways in which women moved and used the hammam are neglected in the presentation provided to visitors.

Lastly, we want to introduce an example of an active functioning hammam. After being restored by the Urban Development and Revitalization Corporation of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, Vazir hammam opened in 1993 (Leslie 2001) as the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults.⁷ The décor was changed in order to create an environment that is suitable for children and their creative imagination (the Sarbineh is used as a library, the adjacent Garmkhaneh serves as a play and reading area, while other smaller and intimate spaces are now used for art lessons, and art exhibitions also occur). Tabasi and Ansari (2007) are quite critical about this restoration and use, pointing to some problems related to the reconstruction and adaptation, signalling the erasure of some of the critical hammam identity features and the integrity of the twin structure of the hammam, among others. Gender separation has been maintained: boys on odd days and the girls on even days, but other aspects of the social functioning of the hammam have been lost and are not documented or visible (Figures 9–13).

Conclusion

Hammams have been a key piece in the Islamic urban structure for many centuries (Lambton and Sourdel-Thomine 2007, Dumreicher 2008, Sibley 2008). In the last decades, changes in the urban structure, in society, in the quotidian way of life and in the economy, have been the principal reason behind the closure, demolition or reduction in use of hammams. In addition, the lack of a coherent revitalisation programme and urban policies towards the preservation of hammams contributes to this negative cycle. This paper points to the need for a thorough investigation of hammams in the city of Isfahan. This would include not only a survey and documentation of existing buildings, their characteristics and uses, but also the views of their present users. Most of the functioning hammams described here are poorly restored or



Figure 9. Vazir hammam – Garvro. Source: Authors, February 2012.



Figure 10. Jolfa hammam Sarbineh. Source: Authors, November 2011.

poorly maintained buildings that overwhelmingly cater for lower income users, which often include marginalised groups such as Afghans migrants. These hammams still sustain a tradition of bathing and health care, but struggle to be economically viable. Many have only a few users per day, although it is impossible to establish accurate figures. While hammams have always been socially fractured – allowing the rich to isolate themselves from the poor – they are failing to provide attractive experiences for contemporary younger generations. On the one hand, structural changes must be made in many hammams, such as changing old systems of supplying water, renewing old toilets, baths and facilities and engaging with renewable energies, but on the other hand, it is the whole image and idea of



Figure 11. Shah *hammam* Sarbineh. Source: Authors, November 2011.



Figure 12. Jarchy *hammam* Big Garmkhaneh and Gavro. Source: Authors, November 2011.

hammams that must be changed. The transition from traditional spaces, which provided a wide range of services, from massage, waxing, hairstyling to nail polishing, to modern societies has created a backward image of the hammam as an anachronistic institution, which is hard to change. As Atassi (2012, p. 32) points out in



Figure 13. Jarchy *hammam* Big Garmkhaneh and Gavro. Source: Authors, November 2011.

relation to hammams in the Mediterranean, ‘further work is required to raise awareness towards a sustainable rehabilitation’.

With the exception of Ali Gholi Aga (transformed into a museum), hammams in Isfahan are also not attractive to the majority of tourists. Not only have they failed to modernise their facilities, but also as they are generally concealed they play a small role in the tourismscape of the city and in heritage tourism. Rehabilitated functioning hammams can play an important role in the re-enactment of collective memories for tourists visiting their home towns, providing new personal experiences and contributing to a reimagination of the past.

For many of the ruined hammams, the future is uncertain, since the lack of planning and funds together with other urban development logics prevents restoration. One possible solution to avoid disappearance or alienation is to understand these buildings as ruins, and to open them up to visitors as such, with adequate information and creativity, with appealing narratives of the past that provide new experiences, as long as safety is guaranteed. Their very fragility and risk can be transformed into their own charm.

Simultaneously, other hammams have been converted or are being converted into passive or active uses according to Büyükdigan (2003), such as museums (Ali Gholi Agha), *child centres* (Vazir), *centres* for cultural activities and restaurants (Jarchy and Jolfa). If properly planned and developed, some hammams may regain an important social role in the city, contributing to the livelihood of neighbourhoods, being part of people’s daily lives, and reclaiming a focal point in the Islamic city. At the same time, tangible and intangible heritage aspects of some

hammams may be fully respected and preserved. Only a careful examination of their possibilities will allow a better understanding of the changing nature of the public sphere in Isfahan.

Notes

1. The ICHHTO is a governmental body aiming to protect, introduce, preserve and restore the country's historic-cultural legacy as well as to promote the tourism industry.
2. While some would argue, he largely disregarded religion (Fazeli 2006), this issue is rather complex, and the Pahlavi state helped to form a national religious morality, especially through education and in many instances acted almost in total contrast to their Turkish counterparts (for a further discussion, see Moazami 2008).
3. Afiyat hammam, now Ferdosi art gallery, is a twin bath used as a gallery for the exhibition of traditional art of Isfahan and as an art education place. Significantly, unlike in functioning Hammams, courses are for men and women simultaneously.
4. Sattari hammam is presently used by a computer and Internet service company.
5. Vakil hammam in Shiraz closed down as a restaurant as the kitchen was damaging the structure of the building. It opened later as a carpet museum.
6. Twenty-first March, on Noruz, or the New Year in the Persian calendar.
7. As part of the larger project 'New Life for Older Structures', this restoration was the recipient of an Aga Khan award for architecture in 1993.

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